



Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club

Registered Charity No. 517641

Co. Mayo, Ireland 24th-28th August 2008

Pre-amble

It seemed like a good idea in the pub. Four of us (Alan Curry, Alan Janes, Tim Watson and myself) were off to Co. Mayo on Sunday 24th August for a few days intensive seawatching but the appearance of a near adult Audouin's Gull at Chapel St. Leonards on the Lincolnshire coast suggested an earlier departure on the Saturday was appropriate. After a torturous route from the M62, we stopped at different points along the coastal stretch where the gull had been seen previously but to no avail. As darkness fell we had amassed only a few gulls including an adult Mediterranean and a handful of Arctic Skuas offshore but marvelled (is that the word?) at the amount of 'holiday' homes and infrastructure around Chapel St. Leonards and Skegness. We drove westwards via Boston to spend the night at a Premier Lodge near East Midlands Airport where we watched Match of the Day and awaited a delivery pizza which had to be transported six miles!

Sunday 24th August

The 09:10 Ryanair flight to Knock, West Ireland left just about on time and arrived slightly early. Quickly picking up our hire car we set off for Belmullet and some serious seawatching. The first species we recorded was Swallow but the list was slow to climb on the journey. After stopping for 'lunch' (an all-day breakfast!) in Ballina we arrived on the Mullet peninsula in the early afternoon. With a moderate south west wind slowly increasing, dull and overcast and a few rain showers it seemed excellent weather for a seawatch! We drove out to Annagh Head and met up with my friend Dave Suddaby (Birdwatch Ireland) who was honkered down in his usual position on the sharp and uncomfortable rocks right at the point!

Birds were obviously on the move, mainly southwards, with an almost constant stream of Manx Shearwaters (between 14:00-19:00 hrs I estimated c2000 passing in my field of view but there were probably many more). I also counted at least 21 Sooty Shearwaters, a couple each of Arctic Skuas and Great Skuas, a Storm Petrel together with many Gannets and Fulmars. Disaster struck during the afternoon as AC called out Fea's Petrel and frantically tried to get everyone else on to the bird. AJ and I failed miserably but TW and three of the Irish birders managed views as the bird shot past the headland and out of sight to the south. Damn and blast or something like that was how I expressed it! This is the second time this has happened to me with Fea's.

Eventually the rocks won and despite the use of 'double arse-pads' (foam mats) we limped off the headland at 19:00 hrs. A good start in terms of seabirds and we ate well in the Western Strands Hotel in Belmullet that night before retiring to our two B & Bs for a good night's sleep.

Monday 25th August

There had been heavy rain and near gale force south west winds overnight which were clearing slowly. After breakfast we headed back to Annagh Head and were in place by 09:15 hrs. Birds were still on the move, again mainly south, with just as many if not more Manx Shearwaters. My attempts at counts were restricted to sample 15 minute stretches which gave numbers between 80-150 but only in my field of view. AC who used his click-counter until 17:45 hrs amassed a tally in excess of 4,000. My sightings of Sooty Shearwaters came to 39 but better still were seven Great Shearwaters, some reasonably close, and a single Balearic Shearwater. Several Storm Petrels and a handful of Arctic and Great Skuas plus many

Fulmars and Gannets added to the impressive passage while Whimbrel had started to move by with about 16 seen.

By 16:00 hrs I admitted defeat and went off with AJ to do some exploring of habitats other than hard rocks and wet sea. We drove down the coast stopping to look at likely wader type places in the bays and then visited Cross Lough which looks as though it should produce something good but we could only find Wheatears, Stonechats, 22 Mute Swans and a plastic decoy duck! A couple of Sandwich Terns were off a nearby jetty.

We were all in the same B & B from tonight which we can heartily recommend (<http://www.belmullet-accommodation.com>). Dinner was in the Talbot Hotel where AC & TW declared the Fish Chowder absolutely spot-on together with the Guinness!

Tuesday 26th August

After breakfast we were back at Annagh Head by 09:00 hrs for more punishment (sorry seawatching). There had been light rain overnight and the wind was moderating but still in the south west. Passage had obviously reduced with only(!) a hundred or so Manx counted by 10:30 hrs but another eleven Sooty Shearwaters, four Storm Petrels and a couple of Bonxies. A total of 32 Whimbrel passed south. We moved back a little way to the large sandy bay at Portnafranagh where there were good numbers of Ringed Plovers and Sanderling, a few Dunlin, seven Knot and a couple of Bar-tailed Godwits. A Raven croaked over. Moving south along the peninsula we stopped at Leam Lough where most waders were distant from the west side but there were plenty more Ringed Plovers and some Sanderling, Redshank, Curlew and eventually a single Greenshank.

The rain was becoming heavier by the time we reached Blacksod Lighthouse right down at the southern tip of the peninsula but we were all taken with the potential for small migrants in the scattered gardens and trees there. We decided to try our luck with searching for a returning Snowy Owl which Dave has had in the previous two autumns on Termon Hill. With the wind picking up and dampness in the air we walked through the standing stone sculpture on the summit and out onto the rocky hill. It was AC who suggested/cajoled us to continue to walk out further but it paid off as about 5 minutes later we heard an almighty roar above the wind and waving of arms as he directed us towards a huge flying white beast! He had stumbled upon the owl while scanning across the rocks. The owl had dropped just over the hillside and as we cautiously approached she took to flight again and landed down on a flat area near the shore. From about 300 metres we watched for about 45 minutes through 'scopes and bins while she in turn watched back at us. Absolutely fantastic and a new bird for me. I even managed to collect a couple of moulted feathers from a grassy hummock which she had no doubt used as a lookout perch. We retreated back over the hill to leave her in peace.

With the score now at Owls 1 Petrels missed 1, I felt much better! We had dinner in the Western Strands Hotel again followed by visits to O.D.'s Bar and McDonnell's Bar. To cap a good day Newcastle beat Coventry City 3-2 after extra time!

Wednesday 27th August

No seawatching this morning as we headed through light rain to Erris Head at the north of the peninsula. Chough was the target here and after a short walk along the cliff there they were, a pair feeding quite close-by. We watched them for some time and also picked up a couple of Twite, one sporting a red-colour-ring part of a local study. Several distinctly-looking Rock Dove-type Rock Doves flew by and I was forced to retract my previously purist stance on not being allowed to tick 'em. A Green Sandpiper literally tumbled out of the sky and landed on the rocky edge below. The small gardens here look great for migrants and we spent a little time just standing at the edge of one particular garden which must turn up goodies. A Chiffchaff and a Coal Tit were the highlights! Backtracking we started to drive out towards Annagh Head again when a Merlin dashed across the road. Arriving at the large bay at Portnafranagh the first bird we saw was a Peregrine standing on the sand. Most of the waders were ignoring this beast – until it flew! Ringed Plover numbers had gone up with over 150 present and Bar-tailed Godwits now stood at three!

With lunch beckoning we went down to Belmullet and had a quick look at the 'harbour' area where there were a number of waders gathering including a Black-tailed Godwit and a strange leucistic Dunlin. After eating we were off wader hunting again, this time moving back down to Leam Lough but a text from

Dave dragged us back to Annagh Head by 16:15 hrs as sea passage had apparently picked up. Settled down on the now familiar rocks, during the next couple of hours I had over 1000 Manx Shearwaters, 43 Sooty Shearwaters and 44 Whimbrel. A Pomarine Skua passed south a bit further out and two other skuas were almost certainly this species. There were also odd Arctic and Great Skuas and a single Puffin sitting on the sea with three Guillemots.

Another good day ended with dinner in the Talbot Hotel where the entries for Guinness on the bill far outnumbered the entries for food!

Thursday 28th August

The last day and only a few hours birding left so naturally we went seawatching. Although Manx numbers were greatly reduced there were still plenty passing and I added two Arctic Skuas, four Bonxies and an adult Pomarine close in. A few Common Scoter and a summer plumaged Red-throated Diver added to the variety.

A warm and sleepy drive back to Knock to return the hire car and catch the very full Ryanair flight back to East Midlands at 18:00 hrs. AJ drove us safely back up the M1 and A1 and we were home around 23:00 hrs.

Postscript

A text arrived from Dave the next day. "Just found a Semipalmated Sandpiper standing next to your leucistic Dunlin at Belmullet". Oh, well done Dave!

Mike S. Hodgson